

## Chapter 6

### A NOTE ON THE DESCRIPTIVIST ALTERNATIVE

What we call the descriptivist account of knowledge and, for that matter, of the expression 'I know', is a classical alternative to its performatory account which has been sought to be defended in the preceding chapter. In this chapter, we shall make an attempt to show the limitations of the descriptivist hypothesis. The obvious purpose it is supposed to subserve is to strengthen the case of the performatory account. Otherwise, there is no reason for us to be concerned with it in the present context.

The central contention of descriptivism is that whenever someone is credited with knowledge, he is in possession of a characteristic mental state, and in saying 'I know' he is to be understood as describing the mental state. Thus the expression 'I know', on the descriptivist hypothesis, is a descriptive expression which, for that reason, unlike a performative, admits of characterisation as true or false.

But how, exactly, is the characteristic mental state, which is supposed to be described by 'I know', is to be conceived? This divides descriptivism broadly into two types.

1. According to one version, the characteristic mental state is unique, simple and unanalysable, and being so it is naturally not reducible to or definable in terms of any other mental state; to be in this mental state is to know something. Arthur Danto uses the name 'Cognitive Intuitionism'<sup>1</sup> for this variety of descriptivism. We have no particular objection to this name and hereafter shall use it ourselves.

2. The second version of descriptivism, named 'Cognitive Naturalism'<sup>2</sup> by Danto, does not, unlike Cognitive Intuitionism, consider the mental state as indefinable; on the contrary, it maintains that the mental state in question is definable in terms of such other mental state as a belief, to be specific, belief which is true and justified.

Now, in attempting to execute our plan to expose the limitations of the descriptivist view of 'I know', we shall confine ourselves to the above two versions of it, namely, Cognitive Intuitionism and Cognitive Naturalism.

## I

To begin with Cognitive Intuitionism. The standard version of this classical view is to be found in

H.A.Prichard's Knowledge and Perception,<sup>3</sup> and in dealing with it we shall have mainly this particular version in mind. This particular version may be summarised in the following points.

(i) When X knows Y, he is in a certain condition or state of mind (and in saying 'I know', he just describes that he is in that condition or state).

(ii) When X knows Y, he knows that he is knowing Y by reflection.

In Prichard's language, "...when we know something we either do, or by reflection can know that our condition is one of knowing that thing..."<sup>4</sup>

(iii) "It [knowledge] is neither true nor false, just as a colour is neither heavy nor light".<sup>5</sup>

(iv) "...when we know, we are not mistaken".<sup>6</sup>

That is to say, we cannot mistake knowledge for any other mental state, e.g., belief, and this implies that in knowing that I am in a mental state of knowing, I know what knowing is.

(v) Knowledge is not definable, in the sense that, one cannot say what it is in terms of anything else.

## II

All the five points listed above are not important — at least not equally important — for our purpose. We are not interested in descriptivism as such. It figures on our agenda and we undertake to indicate its limitations, because it happens to present a counter-model to the performatory analysis of 'I know'. This has already been made mention of. From our point of view, then, what is naturally of utmost importance is (i), the basic descriptivist position, namely the position that when X knows Y, he is in a characteristic state or condition of mind, so that his saying 'I know', may at all be supposed to describe that state or condition. The descriptivist construal of 'I know' presupposes the existence of the characteristic mental state or condition. The presupposition, is, in fact, most crucial. So, what is of first importance for us is to consider whether the presupposition has any justification whatever, in other words, whether the mental state or condition may at all be said to exist.

The mental state in question could have been summararily dismissed by us as hypothetical, as an illusory factual counterpart of knowledge generated by the grammatically substantive character of the word 'knowledge'. But this method of summary dismissal, we are afraid, is not going to be immediately available to us. What comes, obviously, in the way is (ii), i.e., the contention that when X knows Y, he knows by reflection that he is knowing. Thus 'reflection' comes to play a decisive role in Prichard. Accessibility of the mental state to it, tends to provide an initial protection against a possible attempt to reject the state or condition of mind as hypothetical or non-existent.

From this, it follows that whatever truth the basic descriptivist thesis as embodied in (i) may be supposed to possess is to depend on the truth of <sup>the</sup> reflection-thesis as embodied in (ii). But how far is the reflection-thesis tenable? This, again, depends on whether or not the notion of reflection itself can be credited with any intelligibility at all. What, exactly, may 'reflection' be taken to stand for? The word itself, by no means, contains the answer. To decide the issue we have to follow the method of proceeding through the examination of the various possible ways of understanding the concept. And let us do it.

May we take the word 'reflection' to mean what is called introspection, i.e., 'the sort of inward glance by which we are alleged to discover our own internal mental condition?'<sup>7</sup> A possible interpretation to this effect is made mention of by Arthur Danto. But the interpretation involves difficulties which are not hard to see. If 'reflection' be construed as introspection or 'subjective inward glance' then it would follow that the truth-conditions of a knower's knowledge that P are inherent in the knower himself. That is to say, they are entirely knower-dependent having nothing to do with anything besides the knower. But such a subject-oriented position is difficult to uphold. To illustrate the point. Suppose, on someone's saying 'This is emerald', we ask him 'How do you know that it is so?' In answer the knower concerned is to state the truth-conditions of 'This is emerald'. That is understandable. But if the truth-conditions were purely subjective to the knower, then the only way for him to know them would have been to have recourse to introspection. Through introspection alone they would have been accessible to him. But in actuality this is not what happens. The knower concerned does not bother to look into his mind in search of the truth-conditions. That, in fact, is considered irrelevant by him. What he is required

to do and what he actually does is to give his answer by enumerating the properties of emerald possessed by the object called emerald by him. But the properties of emerald are extra-mental objects not accessible to introspection. Which points to the fact that the knower in search of the truth-conditions of 'This is emerald' has to go outside himself and take into account extra-subjective matters. And for knowing such extra-subjective matters he has obviously to adopt means of knowledge other than introspection.

Let us go over to another possible construal of reflection. May it be supposed that when talking of reflection what Prichard has in mind is remembering, or falling back on memory, or what Wittgenstein calls 'seeing into the past?' Such a construal, again, has certain very serious difficulties. Reflection, in the sense of remembering, or falling back on memory, can claim no special significance for itself. For, if reflection be taken in the sense of remembering, then to say that knowledge is known as knowledge through reflection would be the same as saying that remembering is a form of knowing, and that what is known by us can be remembered when we reflect on it. But this, obviously, is not what Prichard or anybody can afford to mean. The worst difficulty that would arise in that case would be that nobody

can speak of knowing through reflection an event of current knowledge : the talk of remembering in the case of current knowing does not make any sense of remembering and thereafter to make an attempt to explain knowledge in terms of it proves self-~~defeating~~<sup>defeating</sup> : it leaves knowledge itself unexplained.

Thus, as far as we can see, an intelligible account of reflection as a distinct means of knowledge is not possible to obtain. The notion has to go and along with that must go the alleged mental state corresponding to knowledge and, consequently, the claim that the expression 'I know' is a description of the mental state. The supposed mental state which is said to be described by 'I know' has no epistemic backing for its existence. The purport of this is that if the mental state is said to exist, then it must exist arbitrarily without any justification.

As a matter of fact, lack of epistemic foundation apart, the descriptivist construal of 'I know' has a serious difficulty which is peculiarly its own. The difficulty is this. Let us take our earlier example of someone's saying 'This is em<sup>e</sup>erald'. We may well ask him how can he say so, or whether he just believes it or knows it. Suppose, he answers 'I know this is em<sup>e</sup>erald', and the basis of this

knowledge-claim is the evidence in favour of the fact that this is emerald. But what makes it pertinent for us to ask whether the person knows that this is emerald and for him to say that he knows that this is emerald? Evidently, the fact that the sentence 'This is emerald' is descriptive of a state of affairs. Now, if 'I know' be supposed to be descriptive in the way 'This is emerald' is, then the person on his saying 'I know that this is emerald' may well be asked by us whether he knows that he knows that this is emerald and he is well entitled to answer 'I know that I know that this is emerald'. And this will continue endlessly.

### III

Let us take up for consideration the second type of descriptivism called 'Cognitive Naturalism' here. This type of descriptivism though not new in philosophy, has been upheld by a number of recent philosophers. These

philosophers include, among others, Chisolm,<sup>8</sup> Keith Lehrer,<sup>9</sup> Ayer.<sup>10</sup> As opposed to Cognitive Intuitionism which maintains that the mental state purported to be described by 'I know' is indefinable, Cognitive Naturalism says that the alleged mental state is definable as justified true belief. It is said that X knows and, for that matter, can justly claim

'I know' only when certain conditions obtain. The conditions are (i) if X believes that 'P', (ii) if 'P' is true and (iii) if the belief that 'p' is justified. Now, Cognitive Naturalism upholds the position that in saying 'I know' one describes in a way basically the same mental state which he describes in saying 'I believe'. That there is a characteristic mental state corresponding to believing, or that in saying 'I believe', the speaker gives a description of the mental state is difficult to doubt. But what is ~~not~~ so is whether knowing is definable in terms of believing, or whether the expression 'I know' describes basically the same mental state as is described by 'I believe'. The problem thus reduces itself to an examination of a relation between knowledge and belief, in linguistic terms, between the expressions 'I know' and 'I believe'. That is to say, we have to say whether knowledge is definable in terms of belief of a certain kind, together with whether the expressions 'I know' and 'I believe' function in the same way in language.

As regards the latter, Austin<sup>11</sup> has made certain interesting observations which it would be worthwhile to take cognizance of.

It we want to challenge someone having said 'I believe' our challenge assumes the form of 'Why do you believe' and not 'How do you believe?' On the contrary, if our challenge pertains to someone's having said 'I know', it takes the form of 'How do you know?' and not 'Why do you know?'. Again, while such words as 'suppose', 'assume', 'be certain', 'be sure', etc., follow the example of 'I believe', they do not follow the example of 'I know'.

The claims 'I know' and 'I believe' may both be questioned out of 'respectful curiosity'. But often they may also be questioned in a spirit of skepticism. In such a case, one more difference between 'I believe' and 'I know' surfaces itself. If we skeptically ask X, 'How do you know?' on his saying 'I know', we suggest that X perhaps does not know at all; on the other hand, the skeptical question, 'Why do you believe' addressed to X on his claiming 'I believe' suggests that X should not believe. In the former case, we are questioning the existence of knowledge itself. But in the latter, we are not questioning the existence of belief but only the evidence in favour of it.

The disparity between 'I believe' and 'I know' in respect of their functioning in language is enough to

make one feel that the two expressions do not belong to the same category, in other words, knowledge and belief are not similar in the way which would justify the former being definable in terms of the latter, or someone's supposing that the former describes essentially what the latter does. There indeed are many points in which knowledge and belief differ.

It is a matter of fact that, ordinarily, one does not say 'I know that P' unless he believes that P. This tends to create the impression that believing invariably accompanies knowing, or that knowing entails believing. Those who are guided by this impression do not, naturally, admit any basic distinction between knowing and believing. For them, the only difference between knowing and believing is in respect of emphasis, in other words, saying 'I know' is an emphatic way of saying 'I believe'. According to them, there is no inconsistency in saying 'I do not believe that P', 'I know that P', just as there is no inconsistency 'This is not a house, it is a mansion'.<sup>12</sup> The second part in each of these two statements does not contradict the first. It only serves to say the first part emphatically. Being a mansion does not exclude the possibility of a building being a house. Likewise, knowing that P does not exclude the

possibility of believing that P. Thus knowing and believing, it is argued, are not mutually exclusive. Saying 'I know' is only an emphatic way of saying 'I believe', which implies that between knowing and believing the difference is just one of degree, and that a belief with adequate emphasis becomes transformed into knowledge. This seems prima facie an untenable position. For, howsoever strongly one may believe that ghosts exist, the existence of ghosts does not become a matter of knowledge. Again, if knowing were basically the same as emphatic believing and, conversely, believing were a weak form of knowing, then it would naturally follow that by increasing the degree of emphasis we can transform a belief into knowledge. That is to say, the statement 'X absolutely believes that P' (instead of 'X believes P') would become logically equivalent to the statement 'X knows that P'. But this does not hold good. A belief about which one is absolutely sure does not for that reason become knowledge, alternately, from the fact that X absolutely believes P it does not follow that X knows P.

Another point to note. Take the statement 'X believes that P'. It is true if it is a fact that X

believes that P and false if it is a fact that X does not believe that P. Truth or falsity of P does not have anything to do with the truth or falsity of 'X believes that P'. Substantially the same point is asserted by Danto when he says :

... the sentence 'm believes that s' may be true invariantly as to whether s itself is true or false, so that if the difference between true and false belief... is only the difference between the truth and falsity of s, then m may believe that S under whatever variations in truth-value of S there may be. Comparably, 'm believes in n' may be true invariantly as to whether n exists... one may believe what is false... In contrast... 'm knows that S' ... entail  $\lceil \bar{S} \rceil$  the truth of S.<sup>13</sup>

One may believe what is false as also what is true. Contrarily, one is said to know only what is true and not what is false. The point may be summed up by saying that

while knowledge is semantically committed to truth, belief is non-committal.

It is ordinarily a fact that when X knows that P he also believes that P, in other words that, X cannot know that P without believing P. But what may it be taken to suggest? At best that normally, believing that P is a condition of knowing that P, not that believing that P is a necessary condition for knowing that P, and that believing that P, for that reason, is a defining characteristic of knowing. To have tongue, lips, vocal cord, etc., even though they are preconditions of making a statement cannot constitute what would help us to define a statement.

We have said that believing that P is normally a condition of knowing that P. This tends to suggest a position to the effect that there are occasions when we know that P without believing that P. But how far is this position correct? Are there really occasions when one may be said to know that P without believing or being sure that P? There, of course, are instances of this kind. Woozley has cited a number of such instances. We may mention one here. The example is that of a man who knows that he has

got what he has

terribly wanted, but can't really believe it.

The man who knows that he has just got something that he has terribly wanted, such as promotion or a particular appointment, not only says that that he cannot really believe it, but may really not be able to believe it — until he is actually sitting at the new desk or wearing the badges with nobody stopping him.<sup>14</sup>

It would be interesting to take note of one final point which differentiates knowledge from belief. Knowledge, if we may say so, is social in a sense in which belief is not. In other words, believing has a characteristic subjective overtone which is not found in knowing. This becomes evident from the fact that while it is perfectly common to say 'So far as I am concerned I believe that P', it would be an outrage of linguistic convention if someone says in the same way 'So far as I am concerned I know that P'.

Knowledge and belief are thus disanalogous to such an extent that it would be a wrong move to define

the former in terms of any concept which involves the latter. They belong, if we may say so, to different categories. It is indeed difficult to deny the value of the insight expressed by Austin in the famous passage we have already referred to.

... saying 'I know' is taking a new plunge.  
But it is not saying 'I have performed  
a specially striking feat of cognition,  
superior, in the same scale as believing  
and being sure, even to being merely  
quite sure' : for there is nothing in  
that scale superior to being quite  
sure.<sup>15</sup>

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